

## **Back Again, Back Again: In Starlight, Part Two**

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

**Abigail, as the intro:** Back Again, Back Again, episode fifteen: In Starlight.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

**Ilyaas:** It was the day before the speech, before the party, and Cassian and I lay on the roof. It was quite late, or quite early, but the passage of time wasn't felt nearly as hard in Rhysea as it is here. We'd climbed through a window in a room I'd never been to before -- an empty bedchamber meant for guests, stripped of sheets to prevent bugs -- just a bare mattress on a bedframe, a mirror on a wall and a dresser in the corner. But the window opened so smoothly that it told me Cassian had done this many times before, because wooden frames warp; they stick with disuse and protest against their opening. The window was situated perfectly in the eaves of the castle,

nestled in the crack of two rooflines, a slanted v opening up. It was climbable, if you tried, and led to all sorts of interesting places if you dared.

We dared.

It wasn't the same as with Rhia -- where every moment we spent was giggling nervous energy, waiting to be caught before we knew of *veritad et consequentia*, where every moment with Rhia was learning strange constellations and strange words and uncomplicated, unpolitical friendship, Cassian and I, in contrast, were seekers and dreamers, wandering, making noise and laughing without fear.

I don't know how to describe the difference. Cassian was knowing gloaming had come to an end, becoming bolder to face the night ahead. Rhia was the soft hope that came with the promise of sunrise.

Neither was bad. Both have their place in the world.

But it was the night before the speech, and Cassian and I lay on the rooftop, having cursed and fumbled and laughed our way there. I lay, as had become habit, with my head on his stomach, and he'd tucked his hands behind his head, a cradle, a pillow.

*What will it be like, tomorrow?* I asked, listening to his breathing as we stared up at the stars. I'd spent all but the last three months of my life staring upwards and searching for

ursa minor -- even now, in this strange place, I looked for the little dipper and found nothing but scattered starlight filling in the gaps of the sky back home. Strange constellations, no ursa minor in sight.

Cassian shifted, bending one leg up towards his chest. He still wore his court clothes, his binder underneath them, having spent the day in meetings with his father the king -- and having finished the meetings out himself, after the king excused himself around midafternoon. He'd missed dinner -- which had made it a silent and slightly excruciating affair, the kings exchanging Rhysean while I, as the queen prompted, stumbled through phrases that'd been drilled into my head -- and he'd burst into my room shortly after my return and begged, in as close as Cassian ever got to begging, to get away.

I didn't hesitate to follow him.

*It'll be like the first night, he said. There will be dignitaries and faces you've seen in court. Folk from the towns around here have been invited, in small quantities -- and will be checked as they enter for malicious intent, but it is good for the people. They should see who we are. He coughed. Dancing, of course, and music both will be present. There's no feast predating this one -- which I thank the stars for, banquet hall days are hell. I will give a speech. The kings will give a speech. You will give a speech.*

*My speech -- I tried. What does it mean?* This still had not been told to me, and word-for-word translations Rhia was not allowed to give -- from a distance, this can be reflected as keeping my knowledge of Rhysean low to make it easier for opinions to be fed to me -- independent thought is harder with limited vocabulary. But at the time -- again, I hadn't thought anything of it, too wrapped up in being a prophecy child, too wrapped up in Cassian and whatever we had become.

*Well -- he said. You extend the invitation to find the poet.*

I sat up. *Shit, really?*

He nodded.

*Oh, shit -- I grinned, pulled my hands over my face. This is happening. We'll have our third?*

*A soldier-poet-king, Cassian confirmed, sitting up too. It will take time. There will be a festival, and -- hells forbid -- banquets. And long nights of music until we find the one.*

I performed celebratory actions too terrible to put into words -- but it involved small amounts of victory dancing.

I stopped. *What happens to us when we find them?*

He grinned crookedly. *We win.*

I flopped back down onto the rooftop next to him. *We win.* It was said like a promise, a surety of what was to-come. All that came with it: battles and death, riding far away and

bringing down a tyrant, *righting this broken world* as the bard had sung --

It would come.

He tilted his chin back and looked up at the stars. *But before all of that, there's tomorrow.* His voice had lost some of its surety, cracked like a child's.

*There is,* I answered, not quite sure where he was going, not quite sure why it was making my heart beat erratically.

He cleared his throat. *There'll be -- dancing.*

I laughed, an odd bleating *ha-ha* that betrayed the anxiety that had sparked in my stomach. *Yeah, but I don't know how. We seemed to be just fine the last time.*

*I could --* he stopped, nervous-laughed, a pshhh through his nose. *I could -- teach you.*

This was not a king, demanding in the form of a question. This was a boy who wanted honesty. Who wanted a genuine yes, whatever jokes he made.

I did not look at him as I responded, because I was a coward and fool. *I mean -- that would be nice -- but we're on a roof. And we don't have music.*

*The roof is flat enough, here. And -- we'd be fine. Without music.*

*A brave ambition*, I said, but stood up, my limbs entirely too stiff and odd, disconnected, not feeling like they entirely belonged to me.

He stood up, too, and suddenly the twelve inches between us seemed entirely too close for comfort. This was not Cassian the king. This was Cassian the boy, Cassian the unsure.

Cassian, who was crossing a line with this request. Cassian, who was asking, gently, as he always did when it mattered with me, for something more than sparring partners on the same side of a war.

And I was fine with it. I was so, so fine with it.

Anger melts off easily when it comes to pretty boys and questions like this.

*Can I* -- he asked, and reached for my hand. I held it out to him, and tried not to laugh as a default to my fear, scared of breaking this moment.

He pulled me closer to him, slowly, the distance becoming nine, six, three inches in baby steps. *Is this alright?* He asked, and put his hand on my lower back, so we stood like lovers in a ballroom, waltzers at a party.

*Of course*, I breathed, and flicked my eyes up to his. He stared back down at me, face hung an inch from mine. I jerked my gaze back down, staring resolutely over his shoulder, ignoring

the pounding of my heart and wild heat in my ears with minimal success.

Cassian froze, for the space of one breath, two, before catching himself. His breathing was shallow, but he cleared his throat and tapped the toes of his left foot to my right. *It starts with you taking a step back*, he murmured, so I did, staring down at our feet, not daring to look up. *Now your left, out to the side*. I matched his step. *Now forwards, and out to the side again -- right foot, this time*.

The waltz began like that -- *careful*, he said, and we stepped through that several times, neither of us daring to look up. Or -- at least, I didn't.

*Now this* -- he murmured, *step out to present* -- his hand slid hand off my waist as he stepped out to the side -- I matched him, raising my outside arm, his touch feather-light on my other hand.

He tapped his outside foot -- *out, behind, out, in* -- and I matched him, then he gently pulled me back in, stepping towards me, and I forgot to look down as I stepped in to meet him --

The world froze. There was Cassian, dark eyes and sepia skin, curly hair and regal bearing -- eyes boring into mine. Searching. We were an inch apart and had forgotten about dancing. The stars hung behind him, blurry and out of focus, because there. Was. Cassian.

I cleared my throat and stepped away, turning my back to him and pulling a hand up to rub the side of my face. I was breathing hard -- harder than I should have been, and tried to conceal it in that shitty way you do after running too short a distance to justify being out of breath: long, shallow breaths, face burning, heart stuttering.

He laughed -- not ha-ha funny, but the sort of nervous *oh shit* I'd been trying not to make myself. I glanced at him from the corner of my eye -- he stood, similarly, profile, arms folded across his chest, one hand raking through his hair.

*I'm sorry* -- we both said, same time, then went silent. I turned to him -- and he shifted, so we faced each other again.

Silence, staring at each other, trying to figure out how to proceed.

And then, carefully, from Cassian: *I don't think that was a mistake, though.*

I pursed my lips. *Neither do I.*

He hesitated, took half a step towards me before stuttering into inaction.

*What -- do we do? From here?* I asked, finally, afraid of his answer: I couldn't imagine something that either of us could say that would make everything go back to normal.

*Go to bed,* Cassian said. *Reevaluate during daylight hours.*



*I agree*, I responded. *Logical. Practical.* I continued, with a string of synonyms that more highlighted the awkwardness rather than alleviating it, then started walking back towards the window from whence we came.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out.  
"Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

**Abigail, as the outro:** Back Again, Back Again is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you'd like to hear more about the show, visit us on Twitter, Instagram, or Tumblr @backagainpodcast or on Tik Tok @abigailelizawrites. Our outro music is Nightingales by Pierce Murphy from the album To Japan, and is licensed under an Attribution License. The song was retrieved from FreeMusicArchive.org. Visit the description of this episode for full copyright information and a link to the page. Sound effect attribution, similarly, can be found in the episode description.

If you've made it this far, thanks for sticking around. You are important in this world and have a role no one else can fill. You are loved. I hope you have a wonderful day.